DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 456 CS 212 900

AUTHOR Ward, Jay A.
TITLE WAC Reconsidered: Issues for the 90s.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991). Best available copy.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Instruction; Higher Education; Teacher Attitudes; *Writing Across the Curriculum; *Writing Attitudes; Writing Instruction; *Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS *Academic Discourse; *Discourse Communities; Educational Issues

ABSTRACT

Characteristics that describe composition studies at its best (interdisciplinarity, collaborative, dialogic, radically democratic, maintaining a dynamic tension between "praxis" and "theoria") do not reflect a view of writing which is widely shared either by academics in fields other than composition or by those engaged in nonacademic writing. In fact, these characteristics do not reflect the view of writing which is widely held and practiced by many composition instructors themselves. As a result, both the capacity of composition instructors to lead in much needed writing-across-the-curriculum programs and the related role in assisting students to acquire writing skills that transfer to other courses are impaired or called into question. Composition instructors must somehow attempt to approach discourse in ways that include the diversity of academic discourse communities, and the varied epistemological assumptions and pedagogical practices that underlie them. (Fourteen references are attached.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Jay A. Ward

WAC Reconsidered: Issues for the '90s

ED333456

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jay Ward

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS212900

Jay A. Ward

WAC Reconsidered: Issues for the '90s

In her chair's address at this conference two years ago, Andrea Lunsford asserted that "writing, as Derrida continuously reminds us, is implicated in all our epistemological, political, and social systems" (73), a proposition with which few of us would disagree. But later she listed characteristics which, in her judgment, describe those of us in composition studies "at our best"; her list included:

> We are strongly interdisciplinary: we blur disciplinary boxes; we blur genres . . . .
> We are non-hierarchical and exploratory, intensely collaborative . . . .
> We are dialogic, multi-voiced, heteroglossic. Our classroom practices enact what others only talk about; they are sites for dialogues and polyphonic choruses.
> We are radically democratic and quick to use new technology to further democratize reading and writing for ourselves and for our students.
> We are committed to maintaining the dynamic tension between praxis and theoria, between the political and the epistemological. (76)

Unfortunately, I am convinced that these characteristics do not, in fact, reflect a view of writing which is widely shared either by our academic colleagues in fields other than composition or by those engaged in nonacademic writing; in fact, they do not reflect the view of writing which is widely held and practiced by many composition instructors themselves. As a result, both our capacity to lead in much-needed writing-across-the-curriculum programs and our related role in assisting students to acquire writing skills that transfer to other courses are impaired or called into question.

Recent studies reveal quite graphically that many--probably most--college instructors in fields other than composition continue to conceive of "good" writing in ways that have been largely supplanted within composition instruction itself; at the most fundamental level,

CS212900

there is increasing evidence that the epistemological assumptions underlying composition instructors' views of language and writing are not widely shared by those in other academic disciplines. For example, Charles Kastelnick argues that the currently dominant process model or, as he calls it, process paradigm of composition has not been validated by research on nonacademic writing (267-68). Nor, in my judgment, has it been adequately researched relative to academic writing in settings other than the composition classroom. Implicit in process theories and pedagogical practices are assumptions, among others, that writing is recursive and cyclic, that writers write to solve problems, that audience analysis is prominent, and that invention is privileged above conventional forms; in contrast, most writing outside the composition classroom is seen as linear, problem-solving occurs before writing, audience is seen solely as the instructor/reader, and conventional forms are valued (Kastelnick 269).

More significant, our emphasis on writing as a process is neither widely practiced nor accepted epistemologically by our colleagues. A fascinating but also disturbing article that appeared in College Composition and Communication just over a year ago detailed the experiences of Susan Miller and some of her students at the University of Utah in attempting to transfer the process approach that they had learned in the composition classroom to other courses. One of the students wrote that "none of us encountered . . . the collaboration, sharing, and only self-competitive circumstances" of English. "Our learning processes were visible to us . . . . But except in meetings alone with teachers, we were evaluated only by the products of independent work . . . . Teachers across the curriculum did not define

knowledge-making as an interactive process . . . . " (Anderson 17). Further, the students encountered firsthand the variety of academic discourse communities that exist on a single campus; one wrote, "[t]he settings vary in which reading and writing, and the processes they entail, will occur. These settings might be distinguished according to course levels and content, and especially according to values about participation in knowledge-making that differ from those modeled in English" (Anderson 12). Ultimately, the composition instructor herself was compelled to conclude that she had not realized how little of her course could be transferred to other classes and "especially how little of its attitude toward student participation in shared creations and validations of knowledge would be recognizable . . . . [N]either the content nor the course conduct that contains it matches, in any <u>essential</u> way, the pedagogic/cultural values that shape and limit knowledge in other introductions to the academically literate workplace" (Anderson 28-29).

Susan McLeod notes that the very idea of writing to learn is contrary to the predominant paradigm of higher education (343). Just how alien writing-to-learn is as a model is illustrated by Dorothy Winsor's study of the nonacademic discourse assumptions of engineers; she concluded that those of us in composition "accept the idea that our knowledge is shaped by our language . . . . [But] engineers tend not only to see their own knowledge as coming directly from physical reality without textual mediation, but also to devalue the texts engineers themselves produce, seeing them as simple write-ups of information found elsewhere" (58). Clearly, the engineer and the writing instructor share few common assumptions about what counts

for knowledge, a contrast which we can, I think, assume to exist throughout most academic and nonacademic writing.

Given this dissimilarity between writing instructors' assumptions and those engaged in other academic or nonacademic writing, it is not surprising that students fail to transfer learning in approaching their course work. Lucille McCarthy discovered that "[s]uccessful students are those who can . . . determine what constitutes appropriate texts in each classroom: the content, structures, language, ways of thinking, and types of evidence required in that discipline and by that teacher . . . ." (233). Equally disturbing, she also learned that even if there are discernible similarities among the writing tasks in various courses, students "interpreted them as being totally different from each other and totally different from anything [they] had ever done before. [Their] characteristic approach across courses was to focus so fully on the particular new ways of thinking and writing in each setting that commonalities with previous writing were obscured for [them]" (245). She also found, incidentally, that freshman composition instructors typically believed that if students were taught "to write coherent prose with a thesis and subpoints, unified paragraphs, and explicitly connected sentences," they were, in fact, adequately prepared in the conventions of all academic discourse (244).

Peter Elbow explicitly reinforces what these students implicitly understood when he writes, "The fact is that we can't teach academic discourse because there's no such thing to teach. Biologists don't write like historians . . . . So although some students may need to write like historians or biologists, few of us in English can teach

them to do so . . . . [W]e are not qualified to teach most kinds of academic discourse" (138). But, of course, we must recognize, too, that there are those within the field who agree with McCarthy's freshman composition instructors and, thus, disagree utterly with Elbow; in fact, Richard Marius alludes to the same academic disciplines as does Elbow when he writes that "the general form of the essay underlies all academic discourse. It is a mistake, I believe, to suggest that because the academic discourses of biologists and historians differ, there is no common 'it' beneath the variations. I find a fundamental similarity of values in the forms of discourse throughout the academy. In my experience students do not know those values but can learn them in a writing course" (28). No two opinions could be more at variance; although the weight of current published comment favors Elbow's view, I am certain that Marius's is widely shared by composition instructors themselves.

These disjunctures between the composition class and other types of academic and nonacademic writing--if they exist-- are exacerbated by the substantial disagreement among members of the writing community itself about what we should be doing and how we should go about it. Elizabeth Rankin argues for the necessity of what she calls a "unified, comprehensive theory of style" which "would be grounded in sound and consistent philosophical/epistemological assumptions about the nature of language and reality" (12), but achieving such agreement seems as unlikely as getting Elbow and Marius to agree on whether there is a unitary form of academic discourse. For example, Richard Fulkerson believes that we have now achieved a "significant consensus" to approach writing from what he terms a "rhetorical axiology" but

admits that "[s]ignificant disparities . . . continue to exist about process, pedagogy, and epistemology. We are closer to agreeing on where we want to go, but not on how to get there" (411). But even if there is widely-shared agreement within the profession that our approach should be rhetorical, there is equally significant disagreement about what that rhetorical approach should be. Elbow, for example, identifies and describes ten different discourses in our field, most of which also correspond to rhetorical or critical schools or approaches (138-39).

Given these varied approaches, then, we should not be surprised at John Schilb's questioning of "whether any synthesis or alternation of perspectives we achieve for ourselves can be pervasively <u>institutionalized</u> in the curricula . . . . We have to face the strong possibility that no one version of 'rhetoric' will come to rule over the average English department . . . ." (437). And Linda Flower, commenting on the controversy within English studies about whether individual cognition or social and cultural context serves as the driving force behind writing, asks, "Can we, for instance, reconcile a commitment to nurturing a personal voice, individual purpose, or an inner, self-directed process of meaning making with rhetoric's traditional assumption that both inquiry and purpose are a response to rhetorical situations, or with the more recent assertions that inquiry in writing must start with social, cultural, or political awareness? These values and assertions run deep in the discipline" (282). It is not our purpose here to attempt to resolve these deeply-rooted differences but, rather, simply to note that Fulkerson's claimed "significant consensus" among us may be more imagined than

real. I doubt if it is possible to achieve such a consensus, but even if it were, the ultimate desirability of such a monolithic approach is highly questionable.

There are some, finally, who would, in effect, like to have it both ways. Patricia Bizzell, for example, argues that "it would be a mistake to rush closure on a unitary conception of what academic discourse should be" but then insists that "[s]ome consensus is needed so that we can share a discourse and get on with our work, while including the greatest possible diversity of participants . . . ." (663). This proposal, however idealistic or perhaps even contradictory it may seem, nonetheless points in the direction of what writing instructors might <u>realistically</u> hope to achieve in their classes.

As I have noted, there are some individuals within composition studies who believe that there is, in fact, a unitary form of academic discourse, usually called the essay, in which universals that underlie all academic writing may be identified and then taught for students' across the curriculum; others, while recognizing the variety of forms of academic discourse that students will encounter, believe that it is still within the capacity of the writing instructor to prepare students adequately for these different communities. But both of these positions seem clearly to reflect a minority of current opinion about the subject.

More common is the view that the writing instructor may not be able or, as Elbow claims, may not be qualified to teach the wide range of conventions that characterize different forms of academic discourse but may be able, as he puts it, to "teach students the

principle of discourse variation--between individuals and between communities. I can't teach them the forms they'll need, but I can sensitize them to the notion of differences in form so that they will be more apt to look for cues and will pick them up faster when they encounter them" (152). McCarthy identifies what some of these cues are when she suggests that we train students in the process of assessing the demands of particular writing situations by making them aware of what she calls "information sources" that will assist them in adapting appropriately; these sources include what their instructors say in class about writing, model texts that are provided, talk with other students, instructors' written responses to writing, prior experience in the particular discipline, and conferences with instructors (262, 259). Ultimately, and however reluctantly, we must be prepared, as Susan Miller argues, to give up our egocentric assumption that our discourse community is a privileged center that is somehow superior to other writing situations that students encounter (Anderson 31).

None of the previous comments should be interpreted as implying that we should abdicate our role as leaders in writing-across-the-curriculum programs on our campuses; our colleagues in other fields continue to look to us as those who know what "good" writing is, so the opportunities exist for us to share with them some of our recent insights and, in so doing, perhaps actually to bring the varied forms of academic discourse somewhat closer together. Robert Weiss and Michael Peich, in reporting on a cross-curricular writing workshop which they conducted, observe that "[p]redictably, almost all of the faculty members who volunteered for the workshop expected it to be

merely a kind of refresher course on identifying and correcting usage errors . . . ." (33). The authors register concern that "ideas familiar to readers of CCC might seem shockingly 'permissive' to an essentially conservative group of faculty colleagues--not only the proposal to create an environment in which students would use writing regularly as a means of inducing learning, but also the comments and advice on more traditional topics. For example, we wanted to demonstrate that academic writing is not merely a matter of proper grammatical choices but that it is a complex rhetorical act requiring great familiarity with usually unstated conventions and expectations . . . ." (34). If that experience sounds very recent and familiar, let me point out that the article was published eleven years ago. Assuming that we do our job as well as possible of preparing students to adapt to the varied discourse communities that they will encounter, then the collaborative responsibility shifts to instructors in those other fields who, as McCarthy writes, "must then provide student newcomers with assignments and instructional supports which are appropriate for first steps in using the language of their community" (262).

Should we assume, then, as we enter the decade of the 1990's, that writing-across-the-curriculum is, in any sense, in trouble, that the diversity of academic discourse communities and the varied epistemological assumptions and pedagogical practices that underlie them virtually preclude unity on any facet of writing more complicated than surface feature correctness? To accept such assumptions implies, among other things, throwing our students back on their own adaptive resourcefulness, but this expectation offers a distinct advantage, as

Miller notes, to the better-prepared students who "would easily gain equality in the discourse communities that they were entitled to join because they already participated in the social subtexts of those communities" (Anderson 31), while conversely disadvantaging the less confident and less well-prepared students for whom the instructor needs to create a broader conception of rhetorical analysis "as a way to uncover traditional public roles and values that we and those in other disciplines foster in concrete academic settings" (Anderson 32). To conclude, then, we must somehow attempt to approach discourse in ways that include, as Bizzell puts it, "the greatest possible diversity of participants [while] remaining open to change in response to cultural literacies of new groups who want to join our projects. We may wish to do away with an oppressive academic discourse, but we cannot do without any academic discourse at all" (662).

Jay A. Ward, Ph.D.
Professor and Chairperson
Department of English
Thiel College

Works Cited

Anderson, Worth, et al. "Cross-Curricular Underlife: A Collaborative Report on Ways with Academic Words." College Composition and Communication 41 (1990): 11-36.

Bizzell, Patricia. "Beyond Anti-Foundationalism to Rhetorical Authority: Problems Defining 'Cultural Literacy'." College English 52 (1990): 661-75.

Elbow, Peter. "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshman and Colleagues." College English 53 (1991): 135-55.

Flower, Linda. "Cognition, Context, and Theory Building." College Composition and Communication 40 (1989): 282-311.

Fulkerson, Richard. "Composition Theory in the Eighties: Axiological Consensus and Paradigmatic Diversity." College Composition and Communication 41 (1990): 409-29.

Kastelnick, Charles. "Process Paradigms in Design and Composition: Affinities and Directions." College Composition and Communication 40 (1989): 267-81.

Lunsford, Andrea A. "Composing Ourselves: Politics, Commitment, and the Teaching of Writing." College Composition and Communication 41 (1990): 71-82.

Marius, Richard. "On Academic Discourse." Profession 90. Ed. Phyllis Franklin. New York: Modern Language Association, 1990. 28-31.

McCarthy, Lucille Parkinson. "A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum." Research in the Teaching of English 21 (1987): 233-65.

McLeod, Susan H. "Writing Across the Curriculum: The Second Stage, and Beyond." College Composition and Communication 40 (1989): 337-43.

Rankin, Elizabeth. "Revitalizing Style: Toward a New Theory and Pedagogy." Freshman English News 14 (Spring 1985): 12.

Schilb, John. "Composition and Poststructuralism: A Tale of Two Conferences." College Composition and Communication 40 (1989): 422-43.

Weiss, Robert, and Michael Peich. "Faculty Attitude Change in a Cross-Disciplinary Writing Workshop." College Composition and Communication 31 (1980): 33-41.

Winsor, Dorothy A. "Engineering Writing/Writing Engineering." College Composition and Communication 41 (1990): 58-70.